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**Date deposited:** 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011

**Version of file:** Author final

**Peer Review Status:** Peer reviewed

## Citation for item:

Hamann, S. and Moisl, H.L. (2002) [A Frankish aristocrat at the battle of Mag Rath](#). In: Picard, J.-M. and Richter, M. (eds). *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in honour of Proinsias Ni Chathain*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp.36-47.

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## **A Frankish aristocrat at the battle of Mag Roth**

Stefanie Hamann & Hermann Moisl

### **Introduction**

A main achievement in the study of early Ireland over the past several decades has been the integration of Irish history and culture with that of contemporary Europe. Próinséas has been a prime mover in this [Ní Chatháin & Richter 1984, 1987, 1996], and it therefore seems appropriate to offer her something that advances the integration, even if only in a small way.

Irish ecclesiastical interaction with Britain and the Continent in the early Middle Ages has been extensively researched and described. Much less has been done on such interaction at the level of secular politics. The reason for this is quite simple: the relevant evidence is sparse and difficult to interpret satisfactorily. The evidence that does exist is, however, worthy of careful scrutiny, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the main goal of the historiography of early medieval Europe to date has been as complete and accurate a reconstruction of the period as possible; if one subscribes to this goal, then any increase in historical knowledge of the period is intrinsically worthwhile. And, secondly, understanding of Irish ecclesiastical interaction with the rest of Europe is deepened by awareness of its secular political context: endowments to Irish missionaries were made and maintained by secular lords whose prime motivation was usually political advantage, and the interests of churchmen typically became closely identified with those of their patrons. This discussion aims to develop our knowledge of secular political interaction between Ireland and the rest of Europe in the early medieval period, and more particularly between Ireland and Francia in the seventh century.

There was at least one secular political link between Ireland and continental Europe in the mid-seventh century: the Merovingian prince Dagobert II lived in Ireland for two decades between c. 656 and 675. The reason for his presence and its implications have been much discussed, and have now been --in our view satisfyingly-- elucidated by J.M. Picard [Picard 1991b; see also Wooding 1996 and Richter 1999, 154-6], who argued that Dagobert's Irish sojourn was a consequence of high-level Frankish politics in which the monastic community established in Francia by the Irish monk Fursey and his brothers Foillán and Ultán was deeply involved. We will argue that, a generation before Dagobert II, a Frankish aristocrat named Madelgarius was sent to Ireland by the Merovingian king Dagobert I, and that Madelgarius fought at the battle of Mag Roth in 637 AD.

The discussion is in three main parts. The first part presents and evaluates the Irish evidence for the Madelgarius' presence at Mag Roth, the second does the same for the Frankish evidence, and the third

combines the two. The conclusion then evaluates the results of the discussion, and suggests avenues of further research.

### 1. The Irish evidence

Two medieval Irish vernacular texts, *The Battle of Dún na nGéd* (BDG) [O'Donovan 1842; Lehman 1964] and *The Battle of Mag Roth* (BMR) [O'Donovan 1842; Marstrander 1911], give narrative accounts of the battle of Mag Roth and of the circumstances which led to it. In both Congal Cáech, king of Ulster, fights Domnall mac Áeda, king of the Cenél Conaill branch of the northern Uí Néill, at Mag Roth in northern Ireland, and is defeated and killed. In Congal's army are various allies. These are referred to at various places in both texts, and include the Irish of Dál Riata in western Scotland as well as Britons, Saxons, and Franks. The allies' leaders are named, but only Domnall Brecc, king of Dál Riata (ob. 642) is demonstrably historical [Mac Niocaill 1972, 87-9, 96]. The British leader is Conan Rod, which seems a plausible enough British name of the early medieval period, but to our knowledge there was no such person in the historical record at or around the time of the battle. The leader of the Franks was Dairbhre mac Dornmhar, which means 'Oak son of Great Fist' in Irish, and the Saxon leader is called Garbh mac Rogairbh, which means 'Rough son of Very Rough'; both names are clearly invented. We are interested in the Saxons and the Franks, and apart from the mere fact of their presence and the spurious names of their leaders, the two texts say nothing about them that is of any use to the historian.

The battle of Mag Roth is an historical event that took place in 637 AD. Relative to that date, our two texts are very late. The published consensus at the moment is that the extant copy of BMR was written in the tenth century [Dillon 1946], and BDG in the late eleventh - mid-twelfth [Herbert 1989]. As such, they suffer from the usual problem with regard to the use of noncontemporary texts as historical sources: such texts can, and often do, incorporate historically accurate information, but there is no general way of determining which aspects are historically reliable, and which are not. The question for present purposes is, therefore, whether or not the claim that there were Franks and Saxons at Mag Roth can be believed.

The rest of this section presents arguments in support of that claim. These arguments are preceded by a sketch of the context in which the battle occurred, since some knowledge of this context is required to understand the supporting arguments.

#### a) Historical sketch

The battle of Mag Roth is one of the more securely historical events of early Irish history [Herbert 1989]. It is mentioned in two contemporary or near-contemporary sources. One of these sources is a chronicle begun and maintained at the monastery of Iona in either the later sixth or the mid-seventh century, and based on contemporary local information [Smyth 1972; Anderson 1973; Moisl 1983; Herbert 1988, ch.

1]. This chronicle is now attested in the pre-740 AD entries in several sets of extant Irish annals, which name Congal Cáech and Domnall mac Áeda as the chief protagonists of the battle, record Congal's defeat and death, and date the event to 637 AD. The other source is a short extract from a *Life* of St. Columba written by Cumméne, abbot of Iona from 657 to 669 [Anderson & Anderson 1991; Herbert 1988, 24-6; Richter 1999, 75-84], now included in the late seventh-century *Life of St. Columba* written by Abbot Adomnán [Anderson & Anderson 1991; Herbert 1988, ch.1; Richter 1999, 80-83]. Cumméne writes that Columba had warned the Dál Riata king Áedán mac Gabráin that if he or his descendants should ever show any hostility to his own, that is, Columba's kindred, 'sceptrum regni huius de manibus suis perdat', and further notes that this had come to pass as a result of the battle of Mag Roth: 'Et a die illa usque hodie, adhuc in proclivo sunt ab extraneis'.

These sources moreover have a particularly close association with the protagonists in the battle, which gives them particular authority. By c.500 AD, the small kingdom of Dál Riata in northeast Ireland had colonized the closely adjacent parts of western Scotland, and its royal family ruled from the Scottish side [for what follows see Bannerman 1966, 1968; Mac Niocaill 1972, ch. 4; Byrne 1973, chs. 4-7; Anderson 1973, 134 ff; Nieke & Duncan 1988; Ó Cróinín 1995, 48-52]. As far as the kings of the province of Ulster were concerned, however, the Dál Riata kings remained subject to them, and it appears that at least one, Báetán mac Cairill (ruled 572-81) managed to realize that claim. In 575 an alliance was made at Druim Cett on the Irish mainland between Áedán mac Gabráin, king of Dál Riata, and Áed mac Ainmirech, king of the northern Uí Néill. From the Dál Riata point of view this alliance was almost certainly intended to counter the claims of Báetán mac Cairill. The Uí Néill, who were only beginning the rise to political preeminence which they enjoyed in later centuries, for their part gained a useful ally against an Ulster still capable of asserting itself. The agreement eventually outlived both its originators and was terminated in 637 at Mag Roth, where Congal Cáech, king of Ulster, in alliance with Domnall Brecc, king of Dál Riata, attacked the northern Uí Néill king Domnall mac Áeda, and was defeated. In siding with Congal Cáech, Domnall Brecc broke the long-standing alliance with the Uí Néill; the consequence, it seems, was that the Dál Riata kings lost control over their Irish territories.

The Uí Néill / Dál Riata connection also had an ecclesiastical dimension, and it is from this that the authority of the two Iona sources on Mag Roth derives. The monastery of Iona was established in 563 in Dál Riata by St. Columba, a member of the Cenél Conaill branch of the northern Uí Néill, and all but one of the saint's eight successors in the abbacy of Iona up to the end of the seventh century were demonstrably of the same stock [Herbert 1988, chs 2, 3]. In other words, Iona began as an Uí Néill *Eigenkirche* within the kingdom of Dál Riata, and remained so at and long beyond the date of the battle of Mag Roth. It is also clear that there was a close association between Iona and the Dál Riata kingship from the start. Columba was present at Druim Cett: given his family ties on the one hand and the location of his monastery on the other, it can hardly be doubted that he was instrumental in arranging the alliance

between his cousin Áed mac Ainmerech and Áedán mac Gabráin [Richter 1999, 59-61]. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* also describes the saint otherwise involving himself in Áedán's political affairs --for example, his attempt to influence the Dál Riata royal succession [Richter 1999, 58-61]-- and the very fact of Iona's continued existence shows that Dál Riata royal patronage was maintained after the founder's death. Iona for its part kept a detailed record of the Dál Riata royal house and its affairs, and, as the writings of abbots Cumméne and Adomnán show, there were hagiographical traditions which stressed the benefits of reverence for Columba and his heirs to the Dál Riata kingship. The early Iona references to the battle of Mag Roth are, therefore, pretty much guaranteed to be accurate about the facts of the battle.

b) Arguments

Two main arguments are offered in support of the claim that BMR and BDG are reliable with respect to the Frankish presence at Mag Roth despite their late date. The first (i) is that the two texts preserve demonstrably accurate information about the historical battle, and that there is consequently a priori reason to believe that other aspects of the narrative, such as the Frankish presence, are accurate as well. The second (ii) is that if the presence of other foreign allies of Congal Caech can be substantiated, then the case for the Frankish presence becomes stronger. In combination, the two arguments are held to constitute a good but not conclusive case for the Frankish presence.

i. We have noted that BMR and BDG are of indeterminate historical reliability on account of their lateness relative to the event they describe. They both also contain elements that are clearly intended for literary effect, such as direct speech and accounts of the doings of individual fighters, which one can safely discount as invention. Both texts are, moreover, completely unaware of the historical context of the battle, and instead attribute it to a trivial cause. Nevertheless, they do get the protagonists and the outcome of the battle right, and, as such, are not entirely unhistorical. There is consequently some basis for thinking that other aspects of the narrative, such as the Frankish presence, might be historically accurate as well.

ii. There is a good case for the reliability of the claim that Anglo-Saxons were involved at Mag Roth:

- Because kingship [Yorke 1990, ch. 8] did not necessarily or even usually pass from father to son among the Anglo-Saxons, and because there was no generally agreed mechanism for a king to designate his successor, the *æðeling* who was able to realize his claim to kingship over other --often quite numerous-- candidates did so by force. This led to dynastic infighting as successful claimants tried to eliminate as many actual and potential rivals as possible. If they were wise, dynasts belonging to disenfranchised lines fled into exile and canvassed support at foreign courts for an

eventual return to power [Kirby 1974]. The presence of Anglo-Saxon noblemen among the Irish is, therefore, not surprising in principle.

- We know that Bernician dynasts and their supporters did in fact take refuge among the Irish, and more specifically in Dál Riata, on at least two occasions. The first time was in the late sixth century when, on the accession of Ethelfrith to the Bernician kingship, his predecessor Husa's son Hering fled to the court of Áedán mac Gabráin, king of Dál Riata [Moisl 1983]. The second time was after the death of the Bernician king Ethelfrith (616) and subsequent accession of the Deiran Edwin to the throne of Northumbria. As Bede tells us, 'siquidem tempore toto quo regnavit Eduini, filii praefati regis Aedilfridi, qui ante illum regnaverant, cum magna nobilium iuventute apud Scottos sive Pictos exulabant' [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.1]; at least two of these sons of Ethelfrith, Oswald [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.3] and Oswiu [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.25], fled to Dál Riata with their retinues. Corroboration, if such is needed, comes from Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, which says that Oswald was baptized 'cum xii viris...cum eo Scottos inter exsolante' [Anderson & Anderson 1991, I.1]. The presence of Anglo-Saxon dynasts among the Irish is, therefore, not only plausible in principle, but was the case in practice in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.
- We know that Anglo-Saxon dynasts not only took refuge but also fought alongside Irish kings at least twice [Moisl 1983]. In 603, the above-mentioned Hering and Áedán mac Gabráin attacked Ethelfrith at Degsastan somewhere in Anglo-Saxon territory; from Hering's point of view this was presumably a bid to capture the Bernician kingship, but he and Áedán were defeated. And, in 628, an Anglo-Saxon *æðeling* whom the Irish annals name as Oisiricc mac Albruit fought on the side of Connad Cerr, king of Dál Riata, at Fid Eóin on the Irish mainland, where they were defeated at the hands of Máel Caích mac Scandail, king of Ulster. Not only is the presence of Anglo-Saxon dynasts among the Irish both inherently plausible and historically attested, then, but such dynasts are known to have fought alongside Irish kings on at least two occasions.
- In terms of the political context in which the battle of Mag Roth was embedded, there is good reason to expect Anglo-Saxons to have been involved. Very soon after his return from Dál Riata and his accession to the throne of Northumbria in 634, Oswald extended his patronage to Iona, a monastery wholly controlled by the Cenél Conaill branch of the northern Uí Néill [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.3]. A few years later, at Mag Roth, Domnall mac Áeda of the Cenél Conaill fought and defeated an Ulster / Dál Riata alliance. As a consequence of the victory Oswald became overlord of Dál Riata [Moisl 1983; on Northumbrian overlordship in the North see Kirby 1991, ch. 5] and maintained his patronage of Iona, as Bede's accounts of Lindsfarne and its various English daughter houses attests.

The natural inference is that Oswald was on the Cenél Conaill side in the battle, supporting the family that controlled the mother house of his newly-established Northumbrian Church.

But BMR and BDG claim that the Anglo-Saxons were on the Ulster / Dál Riata side: it looks like either we or the two texts are wrong about the nature of the Anglo-Saxon involvement at Mag Roth. Not necessarily so, however. The early Iona chronicle referred to above records that, on the same day as Mag Roth, the forces of Cenél Conaill fought those of Dál Riata and of the other main northern Uí Néill branch, the Cenél nEógain, in a naval battle off Kintyre [Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, 119; Stokes 1896, s.a. 636]; it appears that the Cenél nEógain were part of the alliance against Cenél Conaill, which is not surprising given the history of rivalry between the two dynastic branches [Mac Niocaill 1973, chapters 1, 2, 4; Byrne 1973, 113]. Why is this significant with respect to the Anglo-Saxon presence at Mag Roth? Because another Bernician exile in Ireland, Oswald's brother Oswiu, had married a Cenél nEógain princess [Moisl 1983; Ireland 1991]. This indicates that the outcome at Mag Roth was not only significant for the Ulster - Dál Riata alliance, but also for Uí Néill and Bernician dynastic rivalries. Given the cutthroat nature of dynastic politics at this time, there is no reason to think that Oswiu would have been loyal to Oswald just because they were brothers -- they might in fact only have been half-brothers [Pummer 1896, vol 2, 161]-- and every reason to think that he was plotting his own accession to the Northumbrian kingship. Indeed, such tension is manifest in the relationship between Oswald's son Ethelwald and Oswiu: after Oswald's death, Ethelwald allied himself with Penda in an attack on his uncle [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.14 and III.24]. On this view, Oswiu aligned himself with the anti-Cenél Conaill alliance at Mag Roth in the hope of supplanting Oswald, though in the event he failed and had to wait until Oswald's death in 642.

A final argument is offered in support of the proposal just made. The references to Congal Cáech's foreign allies in BMR and BDG are but two examples of a tradition of Anglo-Saxons and other foreigners fighting in Ireland which is attested in a variety of early Irish vernacular prose texts [Moisl 1983]. In one of them, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (TBDD), three of the Anglo-Saxon leaders are actually named. Listed among the warriors in the retinue of Conaire, a mythical king of Tara, are [Best & Bergin 1929, 233]:

*Osalt and his two brothers in fosterage, Osbrit Lamfota and his two brothers in fosterage, Lindas and his two brothers in fosterage. These were three princes (rigdomna) of the Saxons with the king.*

All three names are genuine Anglo-Saxon/Germanic [Moisl 1983]. *Osalt* corresponds to Old English *Oswald*, and *Osbrit* to Old English *Osfrith* or *Osberht*. *Lindas* is a little problematical, but its components *lind* and *æsc* are certainly Germanic name elements. We make the following observations about this passage:

- The tradition of Anglo-Saxons fighting in Ireland for Irish kings, or at least the version that TBDD represents, was not derived from the above-quoted *Fid Eóin* annal entry: the entry does not mention *Osalt*, *Osbrit*, or *Lindas*, and TBDD does not mention the annals' *Oisiricc*.
- The TBDD tradition contains genuine Anglo-Saxon names.
- The TBDD tradition refers to the Anglo-Saxon leaders not as kings, but as *rigdomna*, which corresponds directly to Old English *æðeling*, 'heir-apparent'. [Ó Corráin 1971; Dumville 1979].
- One of TBDD's *rigdomnai* is called *Osalt* / *Oswald*; we know from Bede that stories about the Northumbrian king *Oswald* were current in seventh-century Ireland [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.13], and that during his time in exile among the Irish he was a *rigdomna*.

There is, then, a secure historical basis for Anglo-Saxon dynasts fighting in Ireland very near the time of the battle of Mag Roth, and a good case for thinking that *Oswald*, the Bernician king of Northumbria, and his brother and successor *Oswiu* fought at Mag Roth. This lends strong support to the historicity of our two texts' claim that Anglo-Saxons were present at Mag Roth, and by transitivity to the Frankish presence. Despite all that, of course, one can always argue that the Franks were just a bit of literary decoration extrapolated from the presence of the Anglo-Saxons, so none of this is conclusive.

## 2. The Frankish evidence

The *Vita S. Madelgarii I* [Poncelet 1893] recounts the career of a Frankish aristocrat named *Madelgarius* who was born in Strepy, near present-day Binche in the Hennegau region of Flanders/Artois, of minor noble stock. According to the *Vita*, *Madelgarius* was sent to be fostered at the court of *Dagobert I*, the Merovingian king of Austrasia from 623 and of Francia from 629. While there he married *Waldetrude*, daughter of a certain 'nobilissimus vir' *Waldebert*. As a wedding present, *Dagobert* gave him lordship of the whole of Ireland. *Madelgarius* travelled to Ireland with a band of companions, where he was received with great honour; his wife soon joined him there, and they remained for some considerable time. On their return to Francia they had four children, after which *Madelgarius* founded a monastery in *Haumont* where he became a monk, taking the name *Vincentius*, and in about 652 he founded another monastery at *Soignies* [Pertz 1841, 11]. The passage which recounts *Madelgarius*' Irish stay reads as follows [Poncelet 1893, sects. 8-10]:



Audiens interea gloriosus rex Francorum Dagobertus de iam dicto viro Madelgario, quia oboedisset parentibus et copulatus esset matrimonio, valde hilaris effectus est. Honoravit ergo eum censu dignissimo, deditque ei omnes confines Hiberniae in possessionem. Qui accipiens viros industrios atque nobiles, profectus est in possessionem sibi collatam. Susceperuntque eum pagenses terrae illius pacifice cum honore maximo, nullo modo audentes resistere dominationi eius, audientes a compluribus quod honorem maximum apud regem Dagobertum haberet. Demoratus autem ibi multis diebus, non ferens eius coniunx adhuc rudis eius amorem senioris, accipiens fidelissimos viros atque consanguineos suos, profecta est post eum in Hiberniam. At ille cernens eam, valde admiratus est fidem eius, suscepitque eam cum magno triumpho et dixit: 'Quae te ratio fecit tam magnum iter arripere?'. At illa dixit: 'Amor tuus, quia desiderabam perspicere decorem vultus tui'. Et osculantes se invicem atque tripudiantes sumpserunt cibum ex omnibus divitiis terrae illius, egeruntque magnum gaudium tam ipsi quam comites illorum de adventu coniugis. Devoluto ibi itaque multo tempore, reversi sunt in fines Francorum cum opibus magnis.

Dagobert I reigned from 623 to 639. The preface to the *Vita S. Vincentii Madelgarii II* [1867], a twelfth-century work [van der Essen 1907, 288], suggests that Madelgarius was born c.615, and proposes 635 as the year of Madelgarius' entry into Dagobert's service, but these dates are not reliable. The most one can say is that the above passage relates to the period 623-639, the years of Dagobert's rule. Van der Essen [1907, 284-8] took the view that our text, the *Vita S. Madelgarii I*, dates from the beginning of the eleventh century. Work on the *Vita* since then has not greatly advanced knowledge of its provenance [Nazet 1967; Helvetius 1994]: it is possibly based on a lost tenth-century *Vita*, to which the *Vita Gisleni V* [de Smedt 1887], itself a tenth-century work [van der Essen 1907, 287], refers. This leaves us in much the same position as the Irish texts did, that is, the passage of interest is of unknown historical reliability because the text from which it is taken is very late relative to the time with which it deals. As before, an attempt will be made to substantiate the passage by arguing that some aspects of the *Vita* are historically reliable, and that this supports the reliability of the passage in question.

For van der Essen [1907, 286-7] the *Vita Madelgarii* is an epitome of hagiographical plagiarism, which view he substantiates by citing borrowed passages from Gregory of Tours' *Vitae Patrum*, from Sulpicius Severus, and from a range of other *Vitae*. When one discounts textual borrowings, however, our text contains much information about Madelgarius that appears also in other sources:

- Madelgarius' origins in the Hennegau, together with both his own monastic foundations and those of other members of his family, appear in the *Lives* of several contemporary local saints: the eleventh-century *Vita S. Auberti* [de Ghesquière 1785], the *Vita S. Gisleni III* [de Smedt 1886] of c.1000, the early tenth-century *Vita S. Gisleni V* [de Smedt 1887], and the eleventh-century *Vita S. Foillani IV* [1883].
- Waldebert, with whose family Madelgarius is alleged to have been connected via marriage to Waldertrude (first mentioned in the *Vita Aldegundis*, which dates from the first half of the ninth century [Krusch & Levison 1913, chs. 2, 4]), is referred to also by Fredegar [Krusch 1888a, IV, 54] as *domesticus* to Chlothar II, as are her uncles Landrich and Gundeland, successively *maior domus* in Neustria 584-616/7 [Krusch 1888a, IV.25,26,45; see also *Liber Historiae Francorum* [Krusch 1888b, chs. 35, 36, 40, 42] and *Vita Gaugerici* [Krusch 1896, ch. 9]].
- Madelgarius appears as a nobleman in the service of Dagobert I in the *Vita Aldegundis* [Krusch & Levison 1913, ch. 4], in a trio of texts which depend on the *Vita Aldegundis* (*Vita Waldetrudis*, *Vita Aldetrudis*, and *Vita Madelbertae*, for which see [van der Essen 1907, 219-44]), and in the *Vita Gisleni II* [1883] and *V* [de Smedt 1887, ch. 7].
- Madelgarius' involvement in Irish affairs appears also in the *Vita S. Foillani III* [1883], the *Vita S. Foillani IV* [1883], and --in somewhat different terms-- the *Vita Ettonis* [1867]. No clear interrelationship of these texts has been established [van de Essen 1907, 160, 161, 282-4, 288].
- Madelgarius is also mentioned in the *Gesta Episcoporum Cameracensium* [Pertz 1846, 409] and the *Annales Laubienses* for the year 652 [Pertz 1841, 11].

The corroborative value of a set of texts relative to information of interest --here Madelgarius' career-- depends crucially on them being independent in the sense that the texts' authors did not use one another's work or a common source. But such independence is impossible in principle to demonstrate. One can show that author *x* **did** use author *y*'s work, or that the two used a common source, by citing textual borrowing or influence, or by arguing on good grounds that he is likely to have done so. It cannot, however, be shown that author *x* **did not** use author *y*'s work, or that the two did not use a common source: absence of formal textual criteria or of strong plausibility arguments for borrowing of information does not logically imply that there was no borrowing. In the present instance, a few of the above texts have been argued to be interdependent and thus lack corroborative value, and a few have been asserted to be independent, but, as far as we are aware, their textual interdependence is for the most part unknown because it has not been properly studied. All one can hope for in this situation is probabilistic corroboration: the greater the number

of texts, the less likely it is that they are all interrelated. That is the argument here. Given the relatively large number of texts that refer to Madelgarius, and also that these texts bring him into contact with persons whose historicity is beyond doubt, such as Dagobert I and the family of Waldebert, it is pretty much certain that Madelgarius is an historical figure and that the main facts of his life as they appear in the textual record are true. His connection with Ireland depends on a small number of texts whose interdependence is unknown, and which thus lack corroborative value; since the *Vita S. Madelgarii I* is reliable in other respects of Madelgarius' historical context, however, there is reason to believe it in this respect as well.

### **3. Irish and Frankish evidence combined**

We have two sources of evidence in support of our claim that a Frankish aristocrat named Madelgarius was sent to Ireland by the Merovingian king Dagobert I and fought at the Irish battle of Mag Roth in 637. The Irish one says that Franks were present at the battle, and the Frankish one that Madelgarius was sent to Ireland by Dagobert sometime between 623 and 639. Both sources are very late in relation to the events they describe, and there is a good but by no means conclusive case for both that the information of interest which they offer is historically reliable. One step remains.

It is possible, in principle, to establish historical truth --the assertion that there was a specific state of the world at some point in the past-- with near certainty. This depends on the availability of two or more textual sources of historical evidence which (i) describe the same state of affairs, and (ii) are independent of one another in the sense that the authors of the respective texts and those of their sources were unaware of or did not use one another's work. In such a case, the features on which their accounts agree can be regarded as historically true for practical purposes because of the low probability of authors independently inventing identical states of the world: the features in which their accounts agree must be based ultimately on observation of reality [Moisl 1999]. The texts are thereby said to corroborate one another. For corroboration to be effective, however, the source texts must be truly independent, and it is not generally possible to establish independence conclusively, as noted earlier. Where independence cannot be conclusively demonstrated, the effectiveness of corroboration is proportional to the conviction which the case made for independence carries.

In the present case, the question is therefore whether Irish vernacular texts of the tenth and twelfth centuries on the one hand, and an early eleventh-century Frankish saint's life on the other, are independent. Our intuition is that they are very likely to be so, and hence that their corroborative value is very high --in other words, that Dagobert I really did send Madelgarius to Ireland, and that Franks really did fight in the Irish battle of Mag Roth in 637. All that then remains is to extrapolate from this to the claim that Madelgarius led the Franks at Mag Roth. We stress that our assumption of independence is purely intuitive, however, and there may well be good grounds for questioning it.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have made what we take to be a strong case that the Frankish aristocrat Madelgarius was sent to Ireland by the Merovingian king Dagobert I and fought at the Irish battle of Mag Roth in 637. If accepted, this raises an interesting question whose elucidation might well shed further light on secular political links between Ireland and the rest of Europe in the seventh century. The question is: what might have motivated Dagobert to send Madelgarius to Ireland?

No serious attempt at an answer is made here. We do, however, suggest three avenues of investigation which we feel might lead to one.

a) Dagobert might have sent Madelgarius to Ireland in an attempt to influence succession to the kingship of Northumbria. To see this, consider the following:

- i. Dagobert had reason to be interested in Northumbrian royal succession. There was a family relationship between him and the Deiran king Edwin of Northumbria: Edwin was married to Ethelburh, daughter of Ethelbert king of Kent and his wife Bertha, herself the daughter of the Merovingian king Charibert of Neustria [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, I.25; Wood 1994, 176]. When Edwin was killed in 633 [on Edwin's dates see Higham 1995, 103 note 19], Ethelburh took refuge with her brother King Eadbald of Kent, and subsequently sent her son Uscfrea and her grandson Yffi to her second cousin Dagobert in Francia, 'qui', says Bede, 'erat amicus illius' [Plummer 1896, vol. 2, 117; Colgrave & Mynors 1969, II.20; Wood 1994, 177-8; Lohaus 1974, 25-6]. It is therefore conceivable that Dagobert would have supported a bid by the Deiran branch of the Northumbrian royal dynasty to reclaim the kingship from the Bernician Oswald, who had taken the throne in 634 after a brief period of turmoil. Support for this comes from a contemporary example of Merovingian kings interfering on behalf of a relative married to a foreign dynast: in 623/4 and again in 631/2 Chlothar II and Chlodwig II respectively threatened to intervene in Lombardy when the distantly-related Gundeperga appeared to be in danger [Krusch 1888a, IV.51, 71; Wood 1994, 167].
- ii. Edwin's potential successors from his immediate family died or were eliminated soon after his death. One of Edwin's sons, Osfrith, was killed in the same battle as his father; another son, Eadfrith, sided against his father with Penda of Mercia, who subsequently had him murdered; both his youngest son Uscfrea and his grandson Yffi died in Francia 'in infantia' [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, II.20].
- iii. When Oswiu succeeded Oswald he married Eanfled [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, III.15], Edwin's daughter, whom Ethelburh had taken to the Kentish court [Colgrave & Mynors 1969, II.20].

iv. Oswald may have been on the Cenél Conaill side of the conflict, and Oswiu on the Ulster / Dál Riata side.

One possible interpretation of (i) - (iv) is as follows. Dagobert initially intended to promote the claims of the Deiran Uscfrea or Yffi against the Bernician Oswald, and to that end sent Madelgarius to fight Oswald in Ireland. After the death of the two princes Dagobert supported the only direct descendant of Edwin's still remaining: Eanfled. Once in Ireland --the *Vita I* says that he stayed *multo tempore*-- Madelgarius found himself unexpectedly involved not only in Northumbrian but also in Uí Néill dynastic rivalries, culminating in the battle of Mag Roth. Since Oswald was linked to the Cenél Conaill, Madelgarius and his Franks found themselves in alliance with the Cenél nEógain / Ulster / Dál Riata party, and thus backing Oswiu. Later, having acceded to the throne, Oswiu reciprocated by marrying Eanfled. This is all very impressionistic, of course, but a careful development of the argument seems worthwhile to us.

- b) There may be a connection between Madelgarius and the later coming of the brothers Fursey [Richter 1999, 126-33], Foillán, and Ultán to Francia, their Merovingian patronage, their involvement in Merovingian politics, and Dagobert II's despatch to Ireland. Madelgarius turns up in the *Vita S. Foillani III* [1883], which says:

*Scottia vero et Hibernia quam abundaverint sanctis viris, ex hoc satis apparet, quod eorum peregrinatio adhuc Gallias sanctificat: huius peregrinationis maxima causa fuisse dicitur dux Madelgarius qui et Vincentius, qui potens in Francia, et ut dicunt, potens etiam in Hibernia, multus ad peregrinandum pro Christo animavit et auxilio fovit.*

- c) There may be a connection with the Franci Patricii mentioned in the Patrician texts in the *Book of Armagh* [Bieler 1979, 128] -- early founders of churches in Ireland that Armagh was, in the seventh century, claiming as its own. Such an Armagh connection would tie up nicely with (b) above, since Fursey and his brothers had clear Patrician links: the *Virtutes S. Fursei* says Fursey himself had brought relics of Patrick with him [Krusch 1902, ch. 19], and the brothers had a strong association with Louth, a church that was in the Armagh orbit in the seventh century [Doherty 1991; Picard 1991b, 34].

Finally, a straw in the wind. The *Vita Ettonis* [1867] claims that Madelgarius was born in Ireland, and that he brought seven Irish saints with him to Francia, including Fursey, Foillán, and Ultán. This flatly

contradicts all the other sources on Madelgarius, and of course the argument that has been made here, but if that argument is ever to gain full acceptance, the *Vita's* claim will have to be dealt with.

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